

# The UK Government's China Audit: call for evidence

Response from the British Academy

May 2025

## **About the British Academy**

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. From artificial intelligence to climate change, from building prosperity to improving well-being – today's complex challenges can only be resolved by deepening our insight into people, cultures and societies. We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engage the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone.

## **About this submission**

This submission represents the views of the British Academy, not one specific individual. We would be pleased to further discuss any elements of the response.

**What evidence base should the Government have drawn upon when conducting the China Audit?**

**What metrics should be used to measure the Audit's implementation and overall success?**

The Government should draw on a breadth and depth of expertise to understand how the UK can respond to the challenges and opportunities China poses. This should include, but not be limited to, academic expertise. For instance, the establishment of an advisory group on the UK-China relationship could support increased knowledge and understanding. It could also help identify potential opportunities to shape the relationship between the UK and China and barriers to effective action.<sup>1</sup> The UK has many world-renowned researchers in SHAPE disciplines (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts) and has a world-class system of higher education. The UK will need to draw on this advantage to develop policy, identify opportunities and mitigate risks.

Sources for expertise to shape the relationship with China should be well-balanced to develop a long-term view of key elements for the audit's effectiveness: alignment of approaches by Government departments and agencies, research security, language and culture studies capacity, and areas for collaboration. As the relationship with China develops and the challenges and opportunities change, it will be important for the Government to build and maintain a consistent and well-supported knowledge base, including higher education, research, and think tanks, on China-related research. The curtailment of funding to organisations, such as the British Inter University China Centre, which was funded for only a few years before its discontinuation, has hampered the development of such a knowledge base.<sup>2</sup>

This knowledge base also needs to be developed through investment in, and monitoring of, interest in engaging with the languages and cultures of China. One metric that could be used for this is language learning. At present, the UK lacks effective monitoring tools and targets for Chinese language take-up in primary and secondary schools, in undergraduate and postgraduate instruction, and use in different sectors and industries, including in the Government. At a time when multilingualism and multilingual education in the UK continues to face steep challenges, a lack of firm commitments and a coherent strategy on how to improve UK's Chinese language skills remains a major barrier to a more sophisticated, evidence-led approach to engagement with China as a global power. The lack of consistent (or sufficient) funding for research, cuts to courses, and lack of interest in encouraging study of languages or foreign cultures in general have all inhibited the development of work on or with China in recent years.<sup>3</sup>

Critically, then, outcomes from and implementation of this audit will need to prioritise accumulating and developing expertise, trust, and resulting gains over the medium and long term. Gains in expertise, international research collaboration, and progress on shared priorities will require well-supported commitment and investment of resources over time.

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<sup>1</sup> The British Academy, (2015), *Rethinking State Fragility*. p. 2, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/328/conflict-stability-rethinking-state-fragility.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> British Inter University China Centre <https://www.bicc.ac.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> The British Academy (2025). *Language Skills and Capabilities in the UK Research Base*. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/language-skills-and-capabilities-in-the-uk-research-base/>

**What are the merits for the Government in publishing an unclassified China strategy? What would the implications be of publishing a strategy? What roles should the FCDO's Arm's Length Bodies play in implementing the FCDO's China strategy and the outcomes of the Audit? And what roles sit in other parts of Government (e.g. other Government departments or agencies)? What would the most useful output be from the Audit, such as a public strategy or a risk assessment framework? How effective is the Government's current 'Challenge, Compete, Cooperate' strategy towards China? What are the gaps and limits of this? In which areas can, and should, the Government engage with China? Where should the Government draw red lines? How should the Government consider and assess trade-offs in the UK-China relationship? For example, how should the Government seek to balance its growth agenda and environmental goals vs. security and human rights concerns in China?**

The current geopolitical context indicates the need to be able to adapt to the potentially different directions of countries internationally. UK engagement may need therefore to be responsive to wider trajectories. An unclassified strategy would need to leave room for manoeuvre in such a context. The uncertainties around the current state of international relationships represent a risk for an unclassified strategy, if it is not set at a level that sets out the principles for engagement without going into detail on specifics that would need to be tailored to developing circumstances.

The UK can seek to partner more deeply on reaching environmental goals, where China is a key player in the global decarbonisation transition.<sup>4</sup> This shared priority indicates the need to consider critically on which areas there should be a focus for UK-China research collaboration and which other areas may not be such a priority or be where the UK wishes to collaborate with China. This further demonstrates the central need for the Government to prioritise in-house development of language, cultural, and context-specific expertise.<sup>5</sup>

The presence of students from China in the UK is a substantial benefit to those students, to UK universities, and to the UK generally. Chinese academics and academic institutions have developed broadly positive international partnerships with UK researchers and research institutions. This has included some universities with campuses in China.<sup>6</sup> Any sudden or major shift in the Government's support of these arrangements would have a significant impact on UK universities, not least because of the importance of international students to university finances. These benefits will need to be balanced with consideration for research security.

Since its launch in March 2022, the Research Collaboration Advice Team (RCAT), a high-profile group within the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, has worked to meet the demand in the academic sector for clear advice from government on the changing research security landscape. This work is welcome and has provided clarity to UK Higher Education and research institutions related to specific queries and in areas including export control, the National Security and Investment Act, institutional governance and research security policies,

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<sup>4</sup> Huang et al. (2022) *Just Transitions on the Ground: Ecological Civilisation in Urban China?* doi.org/10.5871/just-transitions-a-p/P-H

<sup>5</sup> The British Academy, (2015), *Rethinking State Fragility*.

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/328/conflict-stability-rethinking-state-fragility.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The University of Nottingham celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its campus in Ningbo, China in 2024. Access: <https://20anniversary.nottingham.edu.cn/>

and the Academic Technology Approval Scheme.<sup>7</sup> RCAT could be further empowered to advise universities specifically regarding their research collaborations and other relationships with China. Availability of such guidance can mitigate uncertainties and clarify the perceived risks of such partnerships for universities.

At present, there are overlapping and duplicative approaches to research security, export controls, and foreign influence, all of which create incentives or perceived risks to collaboration and exchange with Chinese counterparts. Cross-Government guidance regarding real risks of research with China, particularly research on social systems and technologies, could improve to support increased international collaboration and expertise development. It can be difficult for individuals in UK to estimate the sensitivities and motivations around research with China, and Government could provide clearer and joined-up approaches through networks, information services and communities.

Wider difficulties remain, including any potential future addition of China to the enhanced tier of the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme.<sup>8</sup> A security-centred approach from the UK Government leaves space for Chinese-supported activity to dominate in critical areas. Restrictiveness above a certain threshold on the UK's part will encourage partners to develop collaborations with bodies in countries which impose fewer obstacles. Substantive and clear signposting and advice from Government would be both welcome and necessary to prevent a chilling effect in international research collaborations. In order to develop consistency across departments and agencies on risks and sensitivities, the Government may wish to explore the potential implementation of cross-departmental seminars and a shared monitor function to ensure consistently up-to-date information and reduced uncertainty. If the Government wishes to ensure consistency, ongoing dialogue channels between Government and the public sector, academia and the private sector are critical.

**What should the Government's objectives be for the UK-China relationship in the short term and the long term?**

**How should the Government assess UK dependencies on China? Where should the Government focus its efforts on strengthening UK security and resilience?**

**How might greater UK engagement with China affect other UK alliances?**

**Where should the Government focus its efforts when strengthening 'China capabilities'?**

**How effective is cross-Government coordination on China?**

**How should the Government ensure coherence and consistency across departments, as well as in the public sector, academia and the private sector?**

**Does the FCDO, as well as other Government departments and agencies, have sufficient expertise and resources to manage the multifaceted UK-China relationship?**

Ensuring ongoing research security and trusted research will have to be a key area for the UK to focus its energies. While it is an acknowledged concern in commercial and geopolitically

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<sup>7</sup> Research Collaboration Advice Team (2023). *Research Collaboration Advice Team: progress made from 2022 to 2023*. Access: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-collaboration-advice-team-progress-made-from-2022-to-2023/research-collaboration-advice-team-progress-made-from-2022-to-2023>

<sup>8</sup> Home Office (2025) *Foreign Influence Registration Scheme: enhanced tier*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-influence-registration-scheme-enhanced-tier>

sensitive areas such as biotech and defence-related research, research security is also important in political and social sciences, where the benefits of open and innovative thinking may come under threat. Government should ensure to draw on China-related expertise across the National Academies as well as to monitor directions of political travel within China alongside the activities of Chinese individuals and networks in the UK.

Open and regularised communication with Chinese interlocutors is of paramount importance to navigate this complexity. Implementation of agreements can also help to build a reciprocal basis for the relationship and a heightened level of trust, reducing uncertainty and surprise. Languages, as such, are an essential starting point for approaching the challenges and opportunities that Chinese global influence represents to the UK. To measure strength in language capabilities, the Government may consider monitoring increases/ setting targets for the UK's Chinese language capacities, for instance through indicators of primary provision at Key Stages 1 and 2, GCSE and A level entries and degree-level provision. Understanding access to Chinese language provision, particularly regional disparities and disparities in provision between state and independent schools, is vital to ensuring the UK has the cultural and linguistic capacities to engage meaningfully and critically with Chinese global influence as part of a coherent policy strategy.

In response to the then-Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) target to increase the number of speaker slots in Mandarin by 40%, the British Academy's 2013 report *Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security*<sup>9</sup> warned that this need for increased language capacity should not entirely be met by hiring local staff, noting that this may lead to an under-investment in domestic language capacity. Nearly a decade later, data from the British Council shows that only one per cent of schools in England offer some form of Mandarin teaching as part of the primary curriculum.<sup>10</sup>

Recent research from the British Academy demonstrated the considerable [untapped potential of multilingualism](#)<sup>11</sup> in academic research in the UK, including underutilisation of Chinese languages in research from STEM to Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts. Including linguistic capacities in assessment criteria in the Research Excellence Framework and in applications for funding through UKRI could provide data on the extent of Chinese language capacities among academic researchers and identify areas for targeted intervention.<sup>12</sup> Ensuring talented researchers based in the UK have the linguistic and cultural skills to engage meaningfully with Chinese counterparts, as well as to be able to conduct research in subject areas relevant to Chinese culture, economy and society, is vital for the success for any meaningful strategy of UK-China engagement in the long-term.

Additionally, Government can identify where programmes which benefit development of expertise in languages and cultures already exist and ensure to provide ongoing and consistent support. Chinese-language capacities are significant and strategically vital for any critical and

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<sup>9</sup> The British Academy (2013) *Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security*. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/lost-words-need-languages-uk-diplomacy-and-security/>

<sup>10</sup> British Council (2024), *Language Trends England 2024*. pp. 8-9.

[https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language\\_trend\\_england\\_2024.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language_trend_england_2024.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> The British Academy (2025) *Language Skills and Capabilities in the UK Research Base*.

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/language-skills-and-capabilities-in-the-uk-research-base/>

<sup>12</sup> The British Academy (2025) *Language Skills and Capabilities in the UK Research Base*.

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/language-skills-and-capabilities-in-the-uk-research-base/>

meaningful engagement with China in the coming years. This is not an issue for academia alone; research from the [University of Cambridge/RAND](#) shows that the eradication of language barriers with countries speaking languages other than English, including Chinese, could increase UK exports annually by c.£19bn.<sup>13</sup> The Academy would strongly encourage continued support from the DfE and other relevant government departments towards expanding the UK's Mandarin language capacities, including through continued financial support for the Mandarin Excellence Programme (MEP) in England, which enhances language education with cultural immersion opportunities.<sup>14</sup> The programme has become an established element of the UK's China capabilities pipeline, and indeed of the UK's languages capabilities pipeline more broadly.<sup>15</sup> Its impact has been welcomed broadly by other government departments including FCDO, DBT and GCHQ.

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<sup>13</sup> Ayres-Bennet, W., Hafner, M., Dufresne, E., Yerushalmi, E., (2022), 'The economic value to the UK of speaking other languages', RAND Europe and University of Cambridge.

<sup>14</sup> <https://ci.ioe.ac.uk/mandarin-excellence-programme/mep-schools/>

<sup>15</sup> The British Academy (2020) *Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills* <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/towards-national-languages-strategy-education-and-skills/>